

BACKWARDS PIONEERS

Heidi Naylor

*The wall surrounding them they never saw;
The angels, often. Angels were as common
As birds or butterflies, but looked more human.
As long as the wings were furled, they felt no awe.
Beasts, too, were friendly. They could find no flaw
In all of Eden: this was the first omen.
The second was the dream which woke the woman.
She dreamed she saw the lion sharpen his claw.
As for the fruit, it had no taste at all.
They had been warned of what was bound to happen.
They had been told of something called the world.
They had been told and told about the wall.
They saw it now; the gate was standing open
As they advanced, the giant wings unfurled.*

—“The Wall” by Donald Justice¹

My earliest memory takes place in 1960s Wilkinsburg, where we lived while Dad finished his schooling at Carnegie Tech. Dark brick house and heavy gray sky. Warm, prickly air; a carpet of clover in the grass. A thick cement porch I loved, anchored with square pillars of the same black brick. Chipped concrete steps with graveled wounds and patches.

I’m being chased by the boy next door, a boy I barely know. He’s taller and wears a white button-down shirt and too-short dark slacks. White socks, dress shoes that slide in the grass. His hair is floppy, long and straight, perhaps wet, or slick with hair oil. He’s moving

1. Donald Hall, “The Wall,” *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 13.

fast, slipping and pitching through the side yard between our houses, thrusting a hypodermic needle my way. “I jab you hiney! I jab you!” he yells. The needle glints in my peripheral vision. I’m too afraid to scream, just running, running.

In dreams he catches me. Decades later I realize he was saying my name. *Heidi*. Not hiney. Not honey. His name I’ve forgotten, or I never knew. Wilksburg was too rough for my Idaho farm-grown parents and their young family, and we didn’t stay long. My parents found an upstairs duplex apartment in another Pittsburgh suburb called Beechview, near the top of Rockland Avenue, a street impossibly steep and cobblestoned.

“How about a cold beer?” Joe Maloney asked my dad and the ward Elders quorum helpers, after a long day moving us in.

Our heavy mahogany piano had to be hoisted by pulleys and straps over the outside balcony. Nobody could imagine getting it out. When we moved again, a couple of years later, Dad dismantled it and turned it into a workbench.

Joe and his wife Kay owned the duplex. They lived downstairs with their two kids, same ages as Karl and me.

“Thanks, but no,” said my dad.

“Cuppa coffee?”

“Uh, no thanks.” That started the conversation that resulted in two things: a lifelong, cherished friendship between our families. Also, Joe and Kay studying and talking with the local missionaries for a time, and then deciding to get baptized. Before long, it was natural and wonderful to see the Maloneys at church as well as at home on Rockland Avenue.

Being a Latter-day Saint was—is—unusual in Pennsylvania, despite local pride in the church’s original baptisms within the state. The first LDS temple in Pennsylvania would not appear until 2016, and fewer than fifty thousand Latter-day Saints live in the state as of this writing. My parents must have felt somewhat at sea, as well as very welcomed

in the local branch. When they married in the Idaho Falls temple in 1962, my mother worked as a labor and delivery nurse in Logan, Utah. Dad, fresh off a 2 ½-year proselyting mission to West Germany, had entered Utah State University upon his return a few weeks before the wedding, without even a stop at the family farm on Idaho's Snake River. He'd never held a job outside that farm; nor had he, with a single year at Ricks College where they'd met, distinguished himself in any way at school. My mother proved patient with his life as a student, working to help him through his graduate fellowship at Carnegie.

They were ambitious and adventurous. Energetic. Backwards pioneers, having taken their faith, their capacity, their growing family east rather than west. After Dad graduated and began a successful engineering career, we moved from Rockland Avenue to Bethel Park, a leafy suburb with winding narrow roads, many of them graveled in the 1960s and 70s. One afternoon, an owl flew down the chimney of our stone cottage and into the dining room. Four more kids joined me and my brother Karl while we lived in Bethel Park.

Most of our school friends were Catholic, and lots of neighborhood kids went to parochial school: St. Louise or St. Thomas More. I played softball at St. Louise on McMurray Road, a couple of miles from home, and owned St. Louise de Marillac t-shirts in every M&M color as ball seasons advanced.

But every Sunday, my family traveled in the opposite direction, not once but twice to the LDS church three towns over, in Pleasant Hills. Dad had gone very early for leadership meetings. So Mom drove our green Ford Torino station wagon out and back, to Sunday school in the morning and sacrament meeting late in the afternoon—four trips total. Always through South Park, past the shelter that held a life-sized, lighted nativity in December; across Corrigan Drive, with its joggers and dogwalkers, its roller rink and swimming pool; then winding uphill through picnic groves and playgrounds and Frisbee fields. Shadows of leaves dappled the car windows, casting me alternately in sun and

shade as I watched people laughing, flipping burgers on the park grill, cracking open beers and Cokes, kids chasing around in shorts and sneakers. Many Pennsylvania days were rainy, but Sunday never was.

Occasionally we stopped to pick somebody up on the way: Marcy, recently baptized and stunning in her wide patent leather belt, her gingham skirt, and lacy blouse. Driving through South Park is mixed up with the faint cloud of her floral scent; eventually I identified it by accident at a Gimbels counter: *J'ardin des Temps*. We sometimes retrieved a man looking into church membership, who dug frantically into the crease of the wagon's back seat until he came up with a wrinkled, crumb-speckled seat belt.

We kids were gently but consistently socialized to fear nothing more than unchecked or rogue government; likewise to question and disparage the exorbitant reach of any church or authoritative body. I believe this stemmed from pioneer stories of exclusion, exile, even extermination; also, it was the 1960s. My parents played the records "If I Had a Hammer" and "Gentle on My Mind." My grade school principal, Mr. Frattaroli, was probably a competent and friendly man of normal dimensions; but I remember him as Mr. Fat and Roly Poly. A Petty Bureaucrat patrolled the Blackwater Falls campground. These were Dad's pet nicknames, always bestowed with a wink and a grin, but chosen to discourage in us any exaggerated sense of control by another.

Our parents were very friendly wherever we lived—Mom, especially, since she was a homemaker and knew the neighbors best; and it would be wrong to imply that her closest companions were LDS women, or that they were encouraged to be. Wilksburg's Mrs. Detar taught her the vagaries of expert pie crusts, and sent me a lovely wedding card, with a check, years after we moved away. Mom sewed and bottled fruit and shopped with Mrs. Clegg, our next-door neighbor in Bethel Park.

But it was also true that we belonged most quickly, most naturally with beloved friends in the LDS ward, and our family cultivated a strong

sense of otherness when we were away from those friends. Though I don't believe this was deliberate, it was consistent, self-protective.



Otherness is something many Mormons feel deeply and respond to in varying ways. As I look back on my parents' actions as sometime pioneers of the faith in Pennsylvania, I'm touched by several things. One is the core of fellow church members whose families kept the church going in that far-flung, forgotten place, stalwart and steadfast in the faith for generations. They are proud of the slender yet tough heritage that is theirs. Sidney Rigdon's First Baptist Church congregation had been based in Library, Pennsylvania, a city whose boundaries border Bethel Park. Wilsons and Barlows, Hares and Critchlows and Ireys and MacDonalds—they built (literally) the few LDS churches in Pittsburgh; they fundraised for the budget, did road shows and trips to Palmyra, worked at the welfare farm in Somerset; they longed for a temple one day. They are still hoping. The preemptive selection of Philadelphia's temple in 2008 was a bitter blow, in my father's eyes. Mormons clung to one another; they needed each other, they loved and served and friendshipped and married each other, perhaps more than in the Salt Lake Valley. How difficult some of the pronouncements from the Wasatch Front could be for Latter-day Saints in "the mission field"—no open houses or parties at baptisms, for example. This makes sense when a stake baptism may include several large families in Murray, Utah. But when just a few baptisms occur each year, a Pennsylvanian Saint wants the chance to bring a little potluck kielbasa and have a party in the gym with people they don't see at school or work or in the neighborhood, but with whom they share a deeply committed journey and worldview.

I'm struck also by how tightly my parents held to their faith, by how patiently they taught their family, and by how steadily they trusted that

they would be blessed and strengthened as they navigated a pathway where they were consistently the outsiders. Their first encounter with otherness, in Wilkinsburg, was frightening. Though they made connections—Mrs. Detar and my first remembered friend, Hercules—they felt, and rightly so, that the family was in danger. So they fled.

The second encounter, in Beechview, was different. My father quickly showed his colors and invited Joe Maloney to join him in his faith; and Joe and his family accepted. The original couples remain close friends, despite my parents' many moves over the years. When we lived upstairs, Karl and I played every day with their kids, Ronny and Susie. Here's how familiar Ronny Maloney's name remained to us: Years later in Bethel Park, my little sister became fed up with the invisibility attached to fourth place in a busy family. She dumped Lincoln Logs out of their zippered suitcase, filled it with extra underwear, doll, and teddy bear, and left the house. The penciled note she left on my parents' bed announced that she was "Ronny away."

Soon she was back, of course, safely home in the family and community that was hers. It's no accident that much of the hope Latter-day Saints cling to is centered in gathering—whether as members of a community that bears one another's burdens and strengthens the feeble knees, but also as forever families, as fellow travelers on a cosmic and eternal journey. We seek community, because we know deeply and instinctively what it is to feel its lack. We are famous for our proselytizing, at gathering others in to the communities we foster. Occasionally and ironically, we fall guilty of excluding or offending those not of our faith.

But otherness remains. For unlike first-generation pioneers, we've run out of frontier. We can't simply escape situations that make us uneasy or upset. Also unlike my my parents with their friends Joe and Kay, we won't often be able to persuade others to join us, in not only embracing the faith that engenders so much hope, but in joining a

singular community. Most of the time, we have to find ways to navigate our faith and the otherness it engenders. For some, otherness becomes enough of a burden that they reject faith: they “Ronny away.” For all of us, recognizing the burden of peculiarity is painful. It’s a kind of fall, one we’re warned about; one we can’t escape.



Dad taught Karl and me to swim on Monday nights at the long, kidney-shaped South Park pool, near our Bethel Park home. He’d walk slowly backwards, keeping just out of reach as we struck and wheeled toward him. Karl had a wild, splashy stroke; mine was less frantic, but tentative and crooked. I was afraid to open my eyes underwater, and when I finally did, my father’s legs looked so white and sculptural I worried they weren’t real.

He must have recognized we weren’t really getting it, because Karl and I were eventually enrolled in summer lessons at Bethel Park High School’s indoor pool.

By the end of our two-week session there, I knew my strengths and weaknesses as a swimmer. My stroke had evened out, and I churned the top of the water smoothly. Coach announced that we’d be tested to move from Guppies to Flying Fish. The test was clear—swim to the other side without touching the bottom of the pool. “If you touch bottom, you’re done,” he said.

No problem. While I waited in line with Karl, chlorinated drops fell from the end of my nose, from my long hair. My fingertips were pale, crinkled raisins, plucking at my swimsuit and letting it smack wet against my skin. I loved this pool, loved that Karl and I were taking real lessons finally, with lots of other, similar kids; not those babyish ones on Monday nights at South Park Pool with only our father. The cavernous room echoed with splashes and shouts. I tasted the chemical air and blinked droplets out of my eyes.

I understood what I was to do, and I knew that I could do it. I saw clearly, too, why we were forbidden, by coach and parent, to dive headfirst in this shallower end of the water. I understood. So when my turn came, I gulped a mighty breath and jumped in, ready to lengthen my body and stroke hard for the finish.

Immediately I was assaulted by the rough concrete floor of the pool. I couldn't mistake what had happened: my foot had definitely scraped the bottom. Had anyone seen this? What should I do? Although my predicament was likely *not* seen, I wasn't worried about coach's authority; I was concerned with another authority. If I wanted to be honest, I'd have to admit I had failed the test before it began. I knew it, and I knew that God knew it. The test, for me, was no longer about swimming. I turned to the side and climbed out.

About a minute later, Karl did the exact same thing.

Confused, wet, unwarmed and uncomforted by what must have seemed to us a mild and private triumph of integrity, we two guppies huddled together in solidarity. We were clearly the nuttiest kids at the pool, and we made no effort to explain what had happened or to ask for another chance. We clutched our elbows, shivering and dripping, our wrinkled feet leaving wet prints on faded turquoise tiles as we made our way behind stacks of shellacked bleachers, past steam-soaked walls toward the colder cold of the locker rooms. We talked to nobody, and nobody talked to us.

I couldn't risk looking at the coach or the other kids, not at all. I saw only one thing: that our gifts—mine and my brother's—they felt like the wrong gifts. Our heritage, strong and sure and hard-fought: that lifeline, its foundation of faith and community and certainly of love—something about it had betrayed us, and not for the last time. It made us at the same time optimistic, sensible and proud, capable through resilience, reliance, patience, even congregation; but also stupid, inflexible, incapable of fulfilling the easiest, most accessible

expectations; wary and isolated and out of touch. In need of rescue. Of escape.

My brother and I were beginning to understand that somehow we'd been born breech; we'd fallen from the secure walls and safety of our family, our faith—we'd fallen into Pennsylvania backward. We were relentlessly, systemically other. And our choices in regarding, embracing, living the faith and the scattered legacy of LDS pioneers would be as complicated as theirs—in gathering against otherness—had been. We've needed and continue to need a long time, a lifetime, to begin to work them out.